

JAMES ENGELL AND ANTHONY DANGERFIELD

Saving Higher Education

FEATURED TOPIC

At the annual meeting of the Association of American Colleges and Universities, the 2007 Frederick W. Ness Book Award was presented to James Engell and Anthony Dangerfield for their book, Saving Higher Education in the Age of Money (University of Virginia Press, 2005).

Saving Higher Education in the Age of Money is a critique of the pernicious syndrome set in motion when the means and concomitant benefits of higher education—money and prestige, in particular—became increasingly accepted as its most important and fundamental ends. The book contends, on the basis of extensive evidence and documentation, that

such a distorted perception of the func-

tions of higher education became far more widespread in the last three decades of the twentieth century than ever before historically, and that its influence has continued to accelerate. This trend is not sustainable. The subjugation of ideals of learning, curiosity, and scholarship to the primacy and glorification of monetary reward will, if allowed to continue, deal a crippling blow to higher education, which, ironically, produces greatest economic, competitive, and social benefits *only* if grounded in the intellectual and ethical objectives that brought it into being and inspired its highest achievements in the first place.

We argue that the *entelechy* of higher education, the web of interlocking goals that join to compose the total function and purpose of higher education, is capable of answering all reasonable demands placed on the system: within that *entelechy* is room for colleges and universities to make education *an instrumental*

economic good, an aid to careers, professions, and business enterprises; *an instrumental social good*, a nursery of improved communication skills and worthy social integration; and *an instrumental civic and political good*, too, one that fosters a deeper appreciation of civic life and the multitude of ways citizens can enliven and strengthen it. All of these goods are obtainable within the *entelechy* of higher education and are reasonable to expect—so long as we remember to cherish and protect what undergirds and precedes them all. And that is the love of learning itself, the desire to know, the desire to impart knowledge, and the desire to regard any application of knowledge through an ethical lens.

Yet, this very love of learning, which, in a healthy ordering of priorities, should nourish and renew higher education, is now endangered by indifference, neglect, and even contempt, while many institutional energies and resources are diverted to aims that cannot, on their own, sustain themselves, let alone higher education as a whole. We analyze and document this perilous shift of institutional emphasis under the rubric of the “Three Criteria.” We use this term to denote a set of policies—sometimes deliberate, sometimes unwitting—whereby *any* field or discipline that (1) promises (accurately or not) higher income to participants; (2) studies money, finance, or business; or (3) receives external funding in large amounts has consistently flourished and been favored relative to those fields and disciplines that don’t. This flourishing or favoring can be demonstrated by any measure: undergraduate enrollments and majors; faculty hiring, salaries, and teaching loads; reliance on adjunct faculty; health of graduate programs; student attitudes; alumni giving; establishment of new programs; or building and capital investment. Over the past thirty-five years, all indicators point to a massive shift in favor of the Three-Criteria disciplines and, correspondingly, against those that don’t fit the bill: some sciences, especially in their theoretical pursuits,

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in the *Age of Money*



Harvard University

a good many social sciences, and all of the humanities. The teaching of reading and writing—arguably one of the few absolute necessities of undergraduate education and the propaedeutic for mastery of almost any intellectual discipline—has suffered painful retrenchment and neglect. Within forty years, as recorded by one prominent study held annually over that period of time, the stated motives of students for attending college have completely reversed priorities. Formerly, enriching one's life, becoming better educated, developing a personal philosophy, and creating an original work or contributing a theoretical advance to science ranked high. But now these fall at the lowest end. Today, more than three-quarters of students confirm that *the* chief reason they go to college is “to be very well off financially.”

The shift away from liberal education, away from the liberal arts *and sciences*, to training dominated by occupational majors is typically

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justified by an appeal to “utility,” to a supposedly clear-sighted appraisal of what the “real” world demands of college graduates. In the absence of opposing arguments, this is a self-fulfilling proposition. If it is generally assumed that occupational courses and majors are superior preparation for adult life and that the nation needs more of them, and if no one steps forward to challenge that assumption, there will indeed be “demand.” But not on the basis of any demonstrated superiority of such curricula—quite the opposite.

On examination, the actual benefits of occupational majors to long-term job performance or security are often hard to discover. Few entry-level jobs necessitate four years of specialized undergraduate study. The same holds true of professional graduate programs: students may *believe* that medical schools want biology majors and that law schools want applicants with bachelor's degrees in economics, political science, or pre-law, but the professional schools themselves, especially the good ones, tell a very different story. They want flexible, adaptable minds, minds exposed to a broad range of knowledge and trained in rigorous critical thinking. Such preparation, more than any other, also contains the seeds of continuing, lifelong education after formal degree programs are finished. In today's fast-evolving world, leaders across the spectrum of vocations need a broadened imaginative and critical capacity, not a prematurely narrowed point of view. In terms of the actual world, a solid liberal arts and sciences education will generally prove the *most* practical preparation for a demanding, high-level career, or for the several careers that an increasing number of adults each will pursue.

But not because it is designed primarily to be immediately utilitarian. And this is the paradox that, running afoul of the short-sighted variety of American common sense, leaves the liberal arts and sciences curriculum in its current threatened state. In contemporary society, the vast though long-term virtues of curiosity-based learning across and among a variety of disciplines are hard to sell, and these days selling is, for several reasons, the name of the game. Fortunately, another variety of American common sense takes the long view and invests not for this quarter or even for this year, but for an entire generation, or, as Native American wisdom puts it, for the next seven.

The Age of Money

The “Age of Money” in the book’s title—the last three decades of the twentieth century and the first years of the present one—could equally well be styled the Age of Marketing or of Branding. Rivalry for prestige or mere name recognition is displacing competition based on merit. As a famous anthropologist wrote, “everything else is lost sight of in the one great aim of victory. Rivalry does not, like competition, keep its eyes upon the original activity; whether making a basket or selling shoes, it creates an artificial situation: the game of showing that one can win out over others” (Benedict 1947, 228). This ethos now permeates academic life. Managed like star performers, students scramble with desperate intensity for the trophy of admission to the “best” (i.e., most prestigious, most renowned) institutions, which in turn scramble for the students whose admission test scores shine and who therefore might be likeliest to land high-paying jobs and coveted spots in graduate programs, and as well for the glossiest star faculty, who in turn often jockey for positions with the *lightest* teaching loads. (Nationally, professorial salaries do correlate with teaching loads—inversely.) Crude but mesmerizing numerical rankings—notably that of *US News and World Report*—stoke the fires, with the unedifying result that institutions within whose walls other sorts of numerical data are subjected to the most searching analysis devote much time, energy, and money fighting over—and not infrequently repackaging their own data to secure—an ordinal placement. (Is Dear State or Old Ivy first this year? Fifth?) These placements are, by the standards of any learned or scientific discipline, quite spurious.

It will be argued that the counters in this game of Who’s Best—able students, eminent faculty, state-of-the-art facilities, multibillion-dollar endowments, etc.—are also sought for the betterment of learning. Fortunately, in many ways they are still turned to that use. But it is now pretense to suggest that that is more than a part of the story, or that so genuine a goal really accounts for the academic *bellum omnium contra omnes* that we are witnessing. Competition—rather than rivalry, to keep

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Benedict’s distinction—is frequently a good force in higher education, but the undesirable effects of rivalry are beginning to wag the dog.

As opposed to practical applications, ideas and ideals lose out in this sort of atmosphere, as do the fragile, inconspicuous, hard-to-market

activities that are the soul of learning. Reading, for instance. Though communication within and between libraries these days is largely via computer, and though card catalogues have long been superseded by digital databases, the college or university library still supports the methodical, scholarly process of consulting and actually reading and studying books and journals, whether on paper or on a screen. Yet, the hard, long work of reading can seem almost quaint in a world devoted to speed. To restore to libraries some of their lost glamour,

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many institutions employ the risky tactic of hybridizing them with student social centers. That may draw some of the crowds back, but what happens to reading? And if reading is hard-pressed in the library, its natural home on campus, how much worse off is it in the dormitory, where, inevitably, much of the reading at colleges and universities must take place? Virginia Woolf's minimum condition for productive study, a room of one's own without distraction, is hard to obtain in many schools.

The essential concomitant of skilled reading, skilled writing, suffers likewise in the Age of Money from its low visibility. While some things are easy to advertise—like one “star” faculty recruitment, a new performing arts center, or a ten-million dollar gift to the endowment—others, like required freshman composition, defy the shrewdest marketer's efforts to dress them up. Only an understanding of and faith in the imperative need for sophisticated verbal skills support their continuing cultivation. As that faith and understanding diminish, composition and rhetoric get put on short rations: writing sections get larger, pay for teaching them stagnates or declines, adjunct faculty and graduate students do more and more of the teaching. Done properly, the teaching of writing (like its counterpart outside the humanities, numeracy) is slow and laborious: time and energy devoted to it are not available for activities like research and publication. But the latter now are not only the highest but

often the only road to professional recognition and advancement. Small wonder then that fewer and fewer tenure-track and tenured faculty (let alone “stars”) volun-

teer or agree to lead writing sections. The repercussions of the creeping neglect of writing are cumulative and severe. Undergraduates who still lack a solid command of expository prose by the end of their freshman year will have to learn it later—or, all too often, not at all. The resulting deficiencies lower the standards of upper-level classes, and, over time, of graduate programs, too. Left to itself, the problem grows worse and ever harder to reverse; too much of college becomes remedial.

“Rivalry is notoriously wasteful. It ranks low in the scale of human values. The wish for superiority is gargantuan; it can never be satisfied. The contest goes on forever. The more goods the community accumulates, the greater the counters with which men play, but the game is as far from being won as when the counters were small” (Benedict 1947, 228). So it has proved. In order to obtain or maintain an elite status (the top, next to the top, in the top fifty...), colleges and universities often lure the most expensively prepared and promising students with state-of-the-art facilities and “merit” scholarships (i.e., financial aid not based on need, aid even for the rich); they hire top-name faculty at high salaries and low teaching loads, and then more teachers of lesser renown at lower pay to fill the teaching gap; they court or approve special research centers, whose outside funding—in fat years—is rumored somehow to circulate to underfunded parts of the institution, but whose shortfalls, when external money dries up, are made good straight from the general budget. The wasteful ways of rivalry are reflected in the ever-rising tuition and fees of American institutions. With the cost of four years at some private universities now hovering close to \$200,000, parents and students can be forgiven their increasing tendency to treat college less as an adventure in learning and character development than as a monetary investment, pure and simple. With the elite schools perceived to pay the highest “dividend” in terms of post-graduation financial security and income, the rush to obtain admission to them has begun to resemble a panic.



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It does indeed cost money, and a lot of it, to run so vast, varied, and complicated an enterprise as the institutions of higher education. That's a simple fact. Managing a college or university constantly involves raising and managing money. There is absolutely nothing pernicious in this. The question then is, does this activity become the *end* of the managing, or is it the *means* to other goals that compose the genuine essence of an educational mission? No one would wish higher education to come up short on funds sufficient to its good purposes. Nor would anyone deny that some segments of a college or university inherently cost more than others: a biochem lab costs more to operate than an English classroom by several orders of magnitude. But the implication that wealth and the prestige that accrues to wealth—"conspicuous consumption," in Veblen's resonant phrase—are the ultimate goals or primary yardsticks of the learned life for students, for faculty, for administrators, or for alumni, is a belief to be repudiated. Every major ethical and religious tradition in the world teaches that wealth or money is not an end in itself but rather a means to other ends. The fact that neither we nor higher education can do without it and that we seek greater prosperity and a higher level of general welfare is no excuse for making an idol of wealth accumulation—for either the institution or the individual—at the expense of the more important educational aims that, if pursued wisely, will paradoxically enhance prosperity in unforeseen and startling ways. The philanthropy that established and sustains many educational institutions is itself a founding rejection of the belief that wealth is the final goal.

What is to be done?

Several things can be done and, if already being done, can be pursued with greater spirit:

- Teach students about the history and multiple functions of higher education, and about the particular functions and unique history of the individual institution to which they are admitted and contribute.
- Without committing restraint of trade, cooperation as well as competition can serve groups of institutions in managing libraries, purchasing, security services, study abroad, even research facilities, and a host of other possibilities.

K. Patricia Cross Future Leaders Awards

The K. Patricia Cross Future Leaders Awards recognize graduate students who show exemplary promise as future leaders of higher education; who demonstrate a commitment to developing academic and civic responsibility in themselves and others; and whose work reflects a strong emphasis on teaching and learning. The awards are sponsored by K. Patricia Cross, professor emerita of higher education at the University of California–Berkeley, and administered by the Association of American Colleges and Universities. Following are the recipients of the 2007 awards:

Kasey Baker, English, University of Tennessee

Bethany Bowling, interdisciplinary studies–biology education, University of Cincinnati

Amy Cass, sociology, University of Delaware

Stephanie Milling-Robbins, dance and women's studies, Texas Woman's University

Evelyn Perry, sociology, Indiana University

Margaret Post, social policy, Brandeis University

Tarsem Purewal, computer science, University of Georgia

Sarah Wise, evolutionary developmental biology, University of Colorado at Boulder

Nominations for the 2008 awards are due October 5, 2007. (For more information, see www.aacu.org.) The recipients will be introduced at the 2008 annual meeting, where they will deliver a presentation on "Faculty of the Future: Voices of the Next Generation."

K. Patricia Cross with winners of the 2007 awards





FREDERIC W. NESS BOOK AWARD

The Frederic W. Ness Book Award recognizes significant contributions to the understanding and improvement of liberal education. Established in 1979 to honor Frederic W. Ness, president emeritus of the Association of American Colleges and Universities, the award is presented at the annual meeting of the association.

For selection criteria, information about the nomination process, and a listing of past winners, see www.aacu.org/about/ness.cfm.

- Internal governance and relations among faculty, administrators, governing boards, and students require constant vigilance and communication—after all, everyone is presumably on the same team and any serious rifts become serious institutional inefficiencies.
- Emphasize and tangibly reward good teaching to a significant degree—in other words, far more than is done today.
- Eschew or at the very least moderate the “star system” of professorial appointments.
- Set financial aid policies that at every level—private, state, and federal—help prevent an educational plutocracy from developing, where wealth greatly increases the opportunity for obtaining quality higher education, which in turn greatly increases the prospect of accumulating wealth.
- Support libraries as well as laboratories.
- Remember that education in professional ethics (medicine, law, business) is futile and comes too late if there is no solid, earlier foundation for it, a substantial part of which study in the humanities provides. To imply that ethics has borders, a concern perhaps in the operating room or the boardroom but not in the dining hall or the dormitory or on Main Street or Wall Street, is to misrepresent the whole idea dangerously.

Ironically, we could have our cake and eat it, too. Colleges and universities can indeed do their part in fostering wealth creation and national competitiveness, and in guiding their graduates to successful and often lucrative careers. But, paradoxically, this will not happen in the long run if they continue to enshrine those derivative benefits of education as the chief goal of the whole enterprise. How can this be? If they continue, then higher education becomes a subservient handmaid to the immediate needs of whatever other forces and institutions—government, large corporations, political parties, ideological think tanks—prevail at the moment, and a blind cog to whatever those forces and other institutions declare are the problems that must be solved and the manner of solving them.

The larger, almost intractable problems we undoubtedly face—climate shock and environmental degradation, affordable health care,

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race relations, globalization, the widening gap between rich and poor nationally and internationally, ethical dilemmas of harnessing technology, immigration and refugees in this country and abroad—these problems and more cannot be solved by single institutions or by a specialist's

mentality alone. Leaders who address them and democratic societies that face them will best be served by a foundational education in the arts and sciences that is broad in scope, critical in perspective, and idealistic without illusions. Moreover, to some degree, institutions of higher education must stand outside of and criticize society itself. Solving society's problems must include that kind of critique. You can't solve problems without asking what went wrong to produce the problem in the first place. In all of this, higher education, and liberal education within it, plays a unique and indispensable role.

We liken the situation to the National Parks system. America's National Parks could—for a while, at least—be run purely as recreation centers, giving free rein to all forms of pleasure seeking, including the commercial and highly mechanized. However, they would soon permanently lose the pristine natural character that had made them special in the first place and, with it, what had once made them attractive as vacation and recreation destinations. They would be effectively ruined. On the other hand, managed primarily as nature preserves, but with accommodation made for visitors and vacationers, they provide recreation to millions on a continuing basis and still perform their paramount function of preserving America's natural heritage for future generations.

This is the higher utility, and in colleges and universities it means protecting a place in society—a set of institutions—not where the market reigns supreme (as it reasonably does in many institutions of another kind), but where the imagination takes root and grows at its own pace, undisturbed by premature or irrelevant demands for a marketable harvest, and where knowledge and the critical spirit can form a mutually supportive union. This applies equally to the arts and sciences. Imagination may sound like the province of writers and musicians, but it is essential to science,



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where the consolidation and cross-pollination of disciplines is typically preceded by sallies of imaginative daring, often, though not always, with no obvious or immediate promise of use. Thus, while possible applications of Pasteur's germ theory of disease were dimly apparent at its genesis, with other grand imaginative leaps like non-Euclidean geometry or Maxwell's electromagnetic waves, who could tell? The vision, sometimes quite fleeting, of a "useful" application has indeed prompted much research at universities, and in some fields it is hard to separate "basic" from "applied" research. But the absence of utility must emphatically not be a deterrent if science is to thrive and not merely content itself with incremental gains in approved areas. We should look for what may well turn out to be solutions to the problems and challenges we do not yet even know will exist, as well as for solutions to the needs of the hour.

Likewise, where knowledge and ways of knowing—"useful," not yet "useful," or simply self-justifying—can settle into various organizational units (i.e., disciplines, departments, and professions), such knowledge and the various methods used to obtain it can then be subjected to the flames of criticism and rebellion, as a grassy prairie is convulsed and thereby renewed by periodic wildfires. As the remarkable Michael Polanyi, physical chemist turned social scientist, wrote in 1962:

The professional standard of science must impose a framework of discipline and at the

same time encourage rebellion against it... This dual function... is but the logical outcome of the belief that scientific truth is an aspect of reality and that the orthodoxy of science is taught as a guide that should enable the novice eventually to make his own contacts with this reality.... The capacity to renew itself by evoking and assimilating opposition to itself appears to be logically inherent in the sources of the authority wielded by scientific orthodoxy. (Ashby 1974, 23)

So it is with all of academic life and with democratic society itself. In educating minds to make use of and appreciate received standards, yet also to criticize and amend those standards, whether in scientific knowledge, literary interpretation, social policy, or technological application, colleges and universities at their best are models and nurseries of democratic citizenship. □

To respond to this article, e-mail liberaled@aacu.org, with the authors' names on the subject line.

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